

Partnering for Healthy Aging in a Small Town

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In 2011 the first baby Boomers will turn 65, marking the beginning of a significant shift in the population demographics of the United States. Contrary to romanticized notions of older people packing up their homes and moving to sunny retirement communities, people between ages 65 and 85 are the least likely to relocate. In a 2003 national survey by the AdvantAge Initiative, 93 percent of older adults said that they want to stay in their communities. As the older population grows over the next 20 years, communities are likely to face an increase in demand for elder-friendly features.

Mutual benefits of elder-friendly communities

According to Mia Oberlink, national project director of the AdvantAge Initiative, perhaps one of the biggest challenges older adults face is “redefining old age and the older years.” People have outdated ideas about what it means to be old. In order to adequately meet the multifaceted needs of older adults, we will need to change our conception of old age. We can start by recognizing that older adults aren’t merely potential burdens. Research suggests that older adults can be invaluable assets to their communities. Older adults have the time, life experience, and skills to serve as active volunteers in their communities. One national study found that 35 percent of adults aged 65 and older engage in regular volunteer work, and 86 percent donate money or goods to charity.

In addition, although many older adults face unique age-related challenges, the solutions to those challenges can benefit the entire community. For example, older adults who are facing limited mobility can benefit significantly from access to public transportation, improved sidewalks, and traffic signals that allow sufficient time to cross busy streets. However, the same community improvements will also benefit working adults and parents walking with young children.

The AdvantAge Initiative

Local communities that want to assess their elder-friendliness have an example to follow from the AdvantAge Initiative. Developed by the Visiting Nurse Service of New York’s Center for Home Care Policy and Research, the AdvantAge

Initiative’s basic tenet is that healthy environments foster healthy people. Researchers in aging at the Center wanted to know how well communities are meeting the needs of older adults and what makes a community elder-friendly.

The project began with the goal of producing two products: a model of an elder-friendly community and a set of objective indicators that local agencies could use to measure and improve their capacity to meet the needs of older adults. The AdvantAge Initiative initially conducted qualitative research in four major US cities to inform and develop the elder-friendly community model (see Figure 1) and the corresponding 33 indicators (www.vnsny.org/advantage/indicators.pdf). AdvantAge identified four domains in which communities can make a difference in the lives of older residents: basic needs, social and civic engagement, physical and mental health and well-being, and independence for the frail and disabled.

After the model was developed, the AdvantAge Initiative sought to measure the elder-friendliness of 10 geographically and demographically diverse communities across the US. Researchers typically turn to statistical data that reflects elders’ health outcomes and use of health care services to assess the status of older people in a particular region.

The AdvantAge Initiative, however, went directly to the elderly. The researchers developed a survey that addressed the 33 indicators of an elder-friendly community and administered it to older adults in the 10 pilot communities.

The results of the local surveys reflected the unique needs of each participating community, making it difficult to compare them. Therefore, the AdvantAge Initiative administered a national survey and compared the 10 communities to the resulting national average of elders’ needs.

In each of the 10 pilot communities, local project leaders organized a community task force. Each task force was charged with using data from the surveys to raise community awareness about aging issues, set priorities, design action plans, allocate resources, and monitor progress on implementing the plans.

AdvantAge at work in Puyallup

Puyallup, a growing western Washington town with a population around 38,000, was one of

the 10 pilot AdvantAge Initiative communities between 2001 and 2007. Approximately 11 percent of Puyallup's residents are 65 and older.

The Puyallup AdvantAge Initiative task force included employees from a local hospital, the health department, the Area Agency on Aging, University of Washington Tacoma, Pierce College, a local senior center, an assisted living facility, and the city of Puyallup.

After conducting surveys with 514 older adults, the Puyallup project leaders identified seven areas that needed improvement: access to information and assistance, participation in physical activity, opportunities to volunteer, affordable housing, gaps in meeting health care needs, transportation and pedestrian safety, and employment opportunities. The Puyallup task force developed action plans for three of these issues to advance elder-friendly changes—access to assistance, physical activity, and pedestrian safety.

Although Puyallup has a Senior Information and Assistance service, the community survey showed that one in five older people did not know whom to contact if they needed assistance. The AdvantAge Initiative Puyallup task force worked with local network partners to help the Area Agency on Aging develop a campaign to increase seniors' awareness of the availability of Senior Information and Assistance. After considerable outreach efforts, Senior Information and Assistance noted a 250 percent increase in the number of community members requesting help.

One-fourth of Puyallup seniors reported that they seldom or never exercise. Some groups, such as people who were isolated or had chronic illnesses or low incomes, were even less likely to exercise. Residents cited a number of barriers to exercise, including physical disabilities, safety concerns, and lack of sidewalks, and many did not have complete information about opportunities for physical activity. The local health department, a hospital, the city parks and recreation department, and a nonprofit organization joined the task force in creating a guide to free and low-cost exercise programs for seniors (Pierce County Washington STAY FIT! Guide 2006, www.nwoi.org/links.htm). They also established a biweekly walking group, the Puyallup Pacers for seniors of all abilities. Five to 10 Pacers meet biweekly at the Puyallup Activity Center and walk for an hour. The Center also hosts bi-monthly on-site walking events at which 20 Pacers get together and exercise at local parks and beaches.

Survey analysis revealed that seniors found transportation and pedestrian safety to be a significant problem in their neighborhoods. Seniors noted heavy traffic, poor street lighting,

limited public transportation, and pedestrian signals that changed too quickly. Using data from the survey and from follow-up focus groups, the city was able to secure grant funding from the Washington Traffic Safety Committee to make elder-friendly street improvements near a senior center and a post office used by a large number of older adults.

Although the national AdvantAge Initiative received \$2.5 million in funding from private, state, and national donors, Oberlink is quick to point out that other communities can assess

the needs of their elders in affordable ways. She offers this advice to communities who want to appraise their capacity to meet the needs of older adults, "When you go out to learn about your communities, don't just seek facts and figures; involve the community in learning about itself. That way, you can move people from passive respondents to active participants in community improvement."

Dr. David Hanson, project coordinator for Puyallup AdvantAge, advises that "the importance of community assessment cannot be underestimated." He suggests that public health organizations, Agencies on Aging, and cities work together to share the labor and cost of community assessment. He cited the Puyallup assessment as pivotal in understanding "what was working for seniors and what really was not working at all."

When we make efforts to identify and address seniors' needs, the entire community benefits, from improved traffic safety to increased volunteer contributions of older adults who have life experience, skills, and wisdom to offer. ■

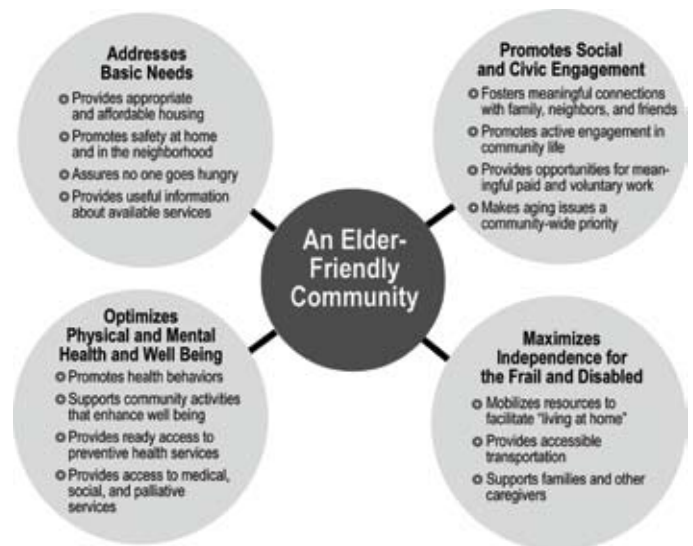


Figure 1. The four components of the AdvantAge Initiative model.

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Resources

AdvantAge Initiative Toolkit. www.vnsny.org/advantage/resources.html#tool.

Feldman PH and Oberlink MR. Developing community indicators to promote the health and well-being of older people. *Fam Community Health*. 2003;26(4):268-274.

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